THE ELDERS OF TWO NATIONS MEET

The mountains on both sides of the central part of the Caucasian range were inhabited by Ossets, descendants of a Samaritan tribe—some eighty or a hundred thousand on the southern slope and twice as many on the northern. Their villages, like fortresses, dominated the passes along both the highways that linked Georgia with North Caucasus. In the summer of 1918 the passes were closed to traffic because of frequent holdups on the highways.

At the beginning of the revolution the Ossets had elected a National Council that became their government. Its emissaries appeared in Tiflis to offer the services of their men to patrol the highway crossing their land, asking for flour, sugar, and gunpowder as security pay. The Georgian government held endless conferences with them, trying to persuade the Ossets on the southern slope to join the Georgian Republic as an autonomous, self-governing province. If their chieftains declined this arrangement, the Georgians would like to see Ossetia as a formally independent republic bound to Georgia by a treaty of peace and friendship. The Ossets dragged the negotiations along. They were reluctant to commit themselves until the status of North Caucasus became clearer.

At last an Ossetian delegation told the Georgians that their elders wanted to meet with the elders of Georgia. It was agreed that Tseretelli and two members of the government would conduct the negotiations, but it was difficult to decide where to hold the convention. Some sixty chieftains were supposed to attend, and Ossetia had no house, no school, and no church large enough to accommodate such a crowd. The Georgians suggested any one of their towns near Ossetia's border. The offer was politely declined. Some of the chieftains suspected of highway robbery refused to come. Finally it was decided to meet under the open sky, beside an old church on the Tiflis-Vladikavkaz highway. Tseretelli invited Emma and me to cover the meeting for *Bor'ba*.

The Georgian delegation went to the convention in two cars with a convoy of fifty horsemen. The officer in command of the convoy explained to me that we had to have a guard of a proper size. If the guard were too small, the Ossets might consider that the delegates were not very important people. On the other hand, if our guard were too large, they might become suspicious. Considering that some chieftains were venerable old men and would not participate in a brawl if one developed, the convoy must be less numerous than that of the Ossetian delegation. The modest size of our guard would show the Os-